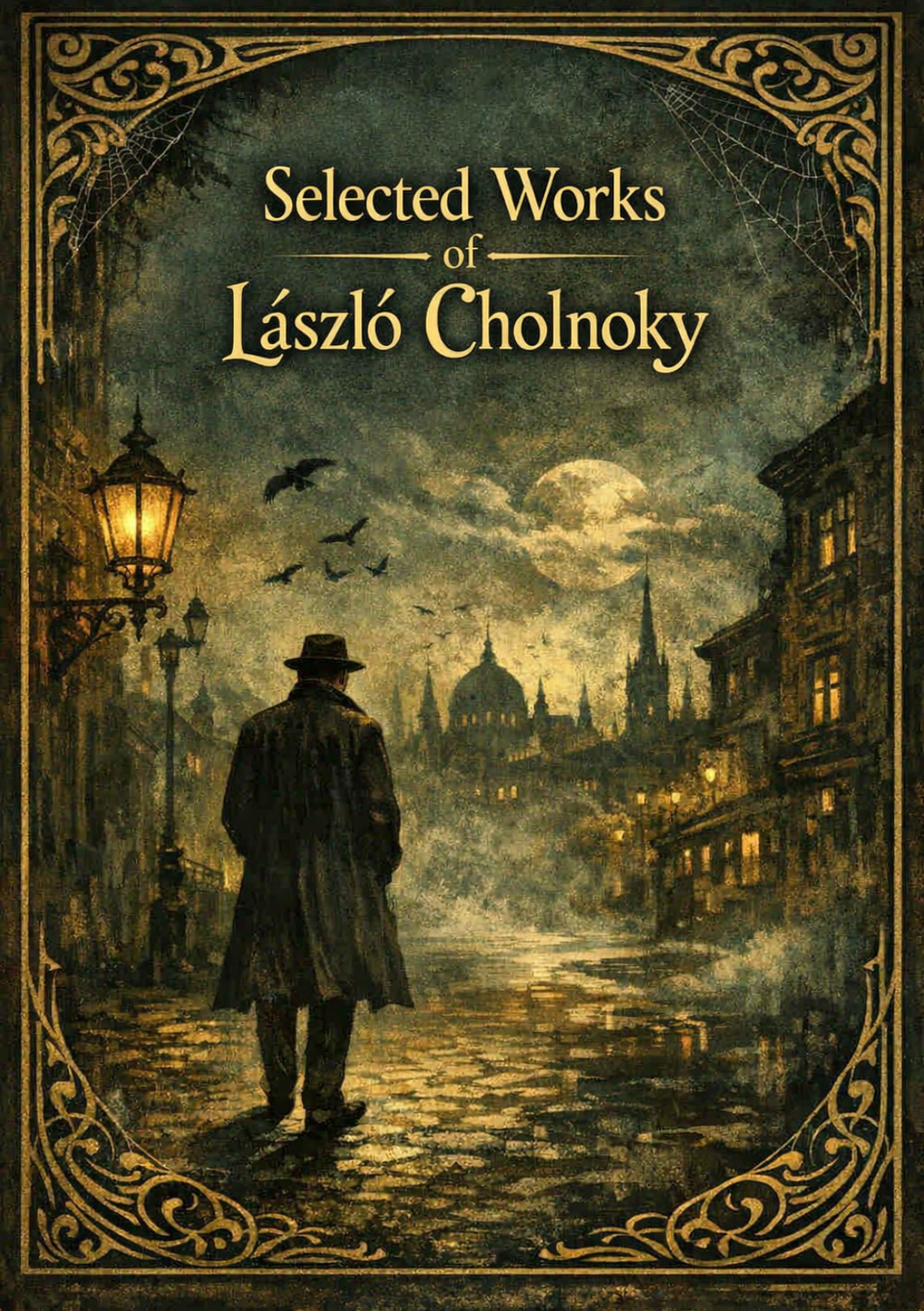
Selected Works of László Cholnoky



László Cholnoky
(1879–1929)

Selected Works of László Cholnoky

Translated by:

Petra Szabó
sz.petra888@gmail.com

2026.

Workshop of Forgotten Books
https://workshop-of-forgotten-books-5687e1.webnode.hu/

All rights reserved

The „Workshop of Forgotten Books” is a multilingual digital archive dedicated to the rediscovery of old – primarily Hungarian – literary works. Its mission is to preserve, make accessible, and pass on those stories that would otherwise slowly fade from cultural memory. The project operates as an independent, self-initiated endeavor.

Table of contents

About the author

Miss Galbory

Psychiatry

My box

The demon

About the author

László Cholnoky (1879–1929) was one of the quiet outsiders of Hungarian literature at the turn of the century. He worked as a journalist and editor, usually under modest circumstances, observing the hidden movements of the human soul with unusual sensitivity.

In his stories, a fine shadow of melancholy, longing, or unease always lingers behind the everyday. His characters are vulnerable, lonely, sometimes lost – and precisely because of this, profoundly human.

Cholnoky was not a writer of grand gestures, but a master of subtle inner dramas: the small fractures, the unspoken emotions, the silent tremors of the soul. His short prose pieces feel delicate and unsettling at once.

Miss Galbory

Miss Galbory was employed as a governess in my uncle's household.

She was in charge of tutoring my younger sister, Jolán, though she made little progress with her, for the child was stubborn and headstrong. A great deal of this was due to Sári Várhalmy, the deputy county head's daughter, who behaved far too familiarly with the girl despite the considerable difference in their ages. Perhaps it was nothing more than a desire to attract attention on Sári's part, but the fact remains that when Jolán was still a mere thirteen-year-old chit, she was already treated like a friend. And in those days, Sári Várhalmy was the foremost young lady in the county, whose friendship many women eagerly sought.

I must say: my sister Jolán was a veritable little tyrant. I believe she was firmly convinced that there existed no girl in the world more perfect, more intelligent, or more beautiful than herself – or, if there was, then only one: Sári Várhalmy. And clinging to this belief, she showed off, behaved insolently, and made such a racket that at times it

was truly hateful even to look at her. Her father and mother, of course, blinded by parental affection, never uttered a single word of reproach. And yet, in time, her misdeeds became all too many.

For much may be forgiven in an immature and spoiled child in the hope that she will one day come to her senses. But enough is enough. And what Jolán did to her governess, Miss Galbory, was indeed too much.

Fortunately, however, her reign at last came to an end – at the very same time when Sári Várhalmy became almost impossible in our house.

But it is precisely this story that I shall now recount.

Miss Galbory was one of God's most unfortunate creatures.

If I begin her description by saying that her face was wonderfully beautiful, everyone will be astonished, for such a thing is not usually counted among misfortunes. Yet I may add that her figure was perfect, and her learning nearly unparalleled. And still, Miss Galbory was deeply, profoundly unfortunate. For alongside all these excellent qualities, she was lame in one leg.

Yes. On her right foot she had to wear a shoe with such a thick sole that it seemed as though she were walking on a cigar-box. Everyone knows the kind: the space between the soles is filled with cork to make it light – a soft, porous wood of the sort used for stoppers. And since poor Miss Galbory also dragged that leg slightly, Jolán promptly nicknamed her – „Corkscrew."

I remember quite distinctly – though it has been ten years since then – that when Miss Galbory was seated, she was extraordinarily beautiful. Her deep-blue eyes were shaded by long brown lashes, and her golden-blonde hair shimmered in the sunlight. But the moment she rose, all her beauty vanished; for then no one noticed the eyes or the golden hair – everyone saw only that one sole of her shoe was far thicker than the other.

And she herself was gentleness incarnate. How much she endured from the immature little Jolán – and even from Sári Várhalmy, who was at our uncle's house almost every day! This proud and beautiful girl tormented Miss Galbory incessantly, just as she did anyone else within her circle – indeed, even more so, for in her case she could find a vulnerable point more easily than in others.

Even then I believed – and now I know it with certainty – that the lovely Sári treated Miss Galbory so unpleasantly out of an instinctive jealousy. For she must have felt that in beauty, and especially in cultivation, she was no match for her.

She was particularly hateful toward the governess when Count Szentirmay was present, for the count – who always saw Miss Galbory seated – paid, as I now recall, far more attention to her than to Sári Várhalmy.

The deputy county head's daughter often tried – crudely and mercilessly – to allude to the governess's physical defect, but apparently in vain. The count paid no attention, or did not understand the hints. Even then, though I was still very young, I saw that this would not end well.

I had nothing to do with the matter, yet I could not help worrying more and more about when they would finally destroy poor Miss Galbory – for destroy her they surely would, I thought, especially since little Jolán was constantly at Sári's beck and call. I was utterly convinced of it.

Yet the exact opposite happened.

On one occasion – my aunt's name day – many guests were gathered at my uncle's house. Among

them, of course, were Sári Várhalmy and Count Szentirmay. I myself was present; I witnessed everything with my own eyes.

After refreshments, we went down to the tennis court, where the adults began to play. Sári contrived matters so that she might be in the same group as the count, while Jolán stood opposite them. I believe they had arranged it beforehand. The ladies and gentlemen sat beside the court, and Miss Galbory was there as well, poor thing, somehow having managed on the way down to conceal her limp from the count.

The game was well underway when, at one point, Jolán – quite deliberately, no doubt – struck the ball so that it rolled straight to the governess's feet. The count was about to spring after it, but Sári, as though she had noticed nothing, detained him. And Jolán then cried out, impudently and commandingly:

„Miss! Pick it up! Can't you see it?"

Poor Miss Galbory flushed red as a rose, but in the next instant a deathly pallor spread across her face. She could do nothing else: she limped to the ball and picked it up.

Sári Várhalmy and the young men of her entourage grinned mockingly.

The count looked at Miss Galbory with startled astonishment; he saw her limp. Then he looked around and noticed the grinning faces. With irritation, he frowned; and in the next moment he flung down his racket, turned his back on Sári, went up to Miss Galbory, took her by the arm, and led her into the house.

An awkward silence fell over the tennis court.

About ten minutes later the count returned. He went up to my uncle and said aloud, so that everyone might hear:

„Doctor, I have the honour of asking for Miss Galbory's hand in marriage."

Ah, how pale the deputy county head's daughter became!

From that day on, she never again crossed my uncle's threshold.

And with her, Jolán's tyranny vanished forever. In place of Miss Galbory, she was given an elderly English governess, who soon set her in such order that she scarcely dared to utter a word.

Psychiatry

Dr. Wolf, professor of psychology, steps into the Golden Mirror restaurant when a sudden rain begins to fall and he has no umbrella with him. He has never been there before, and so he moves about uncertainly, searching for a suitable place. But because of the rain, others too have dashed inside; every table is occupied. Only one appears available – a table where a young man with a very sorrowful face sits alone. The doctor approaches, says good evening, and sits down somewhat awkwardly.

The sad young man nods in return.

Dr. Wolf is, in truth, a veritable maniac of psychiatry. In the mornings, while dressing, he studies his own face in the mirror for minutes on end, drawing his brows together sternly, then gazing with a probing expression – in short, he steels himself for his investigations. During the day, he investigates. Whomever chance brings into his path, he mercilessly peers into their soul. He has already had brilliant successes. Once, for instance, after a brief observation, he determined of a man in a café – who sat constantly with his eyes closed, swaying

his head to and fro, his face ashen – that he was not blind, merely asleep, most likely as a consequence of excessive drinking.

The sorrowful young man is fairly well dressed, though his clothes are somewhat worn. His face is sad; he gazes uncertainly and despondently into the air. Before him stands a glass of wine – evidently a very fine one – yet he touches it only rarely, and then only with the tip of his tongue. His hand, which is not entirely clean, he carefully conceals.

At the neighboring table sit two people: a man and a woman. The man is elegant – indeed, excessively so – but with a faintly roguish air. Of the woman it may at once be established that she is no Carmelite nun. She smokes, and ostentatiously draws her head down away from the drifting clouds of smoke – for women do not blow smoke out; they withdraw their heads from it.

The doctor is exceedingly interested in the sorrowful young man. He reasons thus:

Undoubtedly a gentleman fallen into poverty or dissipation. See – he must be spending his last coins, yet prefers to drink less, but of a finer wine. His clothes, though worn, reveal their quality. They

hang somewhat loosely on him – once he must have lived well; he was likely stouter. That hand nearer to me he keeps hiding, and drinks rather with his left, for it is not quite clean. This, too, is gentlemanly modesty. Now the only question is whether he has come to ruin through his own fault, or whether misfortune has overtaken him undeservedly. But even here I am certain. A dissipated man grows defiant, cynical, even provocative toward those who live decent lives. But how modestly, how sadly this one looks! No – there is no longer any doubt: this is a gentleman reduced to poverty, whose spirit, however, remains uncorrupted. I feel it my duty to come to his aid with my knowledge. It will do him good if I tell him to his face that one can see who he is, and what has befallen him. Let us see!

He clears his throat and asks kindly:

„Am I right in thinking you, too, came in to escape the rain?”

The sorrowful young man lifts his head nervously, looks attentively at the doctor, and says:

„Yes.”

This first „yes” warms the doctor somewhat. Only it is vexing that the cigarette-smoking girl is

grinning; her companion must have said something foolish.

The doctor feels that he must now be very discreet and tactful. Yet it would also be a pity if the neighbors did not overhear and thus bear witness to the triumph of psychiatry. In a half-voice, gently, he asks:

„And… and… have you already dined?"

The young man looks at him again, nervously, and in a dull, hesitant voice says:

„Yes."

The doctor's heart grows ever warmer.

I have forced the poor fellow into a lie, he thinks, but never mind. I am on the right track. Had he not been a born gentleman, he would have said he had not yet dined, and even complained, in the hope that I might pay for his supper.

Embarrassed, uneasily, yet still loud enough for the neighbors to hear, he continues:

„Pray do not misunderstand me, but I believe that supper – how shall I put it… has not exactly burdened your stomach. After all, there is nothing in that… that is to say, it is easy enough for me to speak, but for you – one sees at once that you are a gentleman – for you, privation must be a torment,

and one that has surely fallen upon you through no fault of your own. Forgive me, and do not think me intrusive, but surely… it is love…”

He looks at the young man with curiosity, almost pleadingly, for he feels he is producing something masterful. The young man remains silent for a while, then lowers his troubled gaze and says softly:

„Yes.”

The doctor rubs his hands with delight. Only that wretched cigarette-smoking girl is grinning again. But let the devil take her – what is it to a Wolf how some vagabond nobody may grin?

„Do not take things so sadly,” he encourages the young man in a fatherly tone. „At your age, nothing is lost yet. But sadness is a poor counselor – cast it out of your heart. There is only one true comfort in this world: work! And fortunate chance! Consider what good fortune it is for you to have encountered me this evening – a knower of souls! So then, to work! But a sad man cannot work. Will you promise to cast sadness out of your heart?”

Again he looks at him expectantly. The young man looks back, does not answer for a long time, then finally replies with constraint:

„Yes."

Dr. Wolf pays, shakes the young man's hand, casts a contemptuous glance toward the girl – who is still grinning – and makes for the exit. He is proud and satisfied. Outside, in the vestibule, he asks the head waiter:

„Who is the gentleman I was sitting with?"

„That one? A stoker over at the Kammon Café. Deaf and mute, poor fellow – he can only say 'yes.' If you were to ask him, 'You're a fool, aren't you?' he'd say yes to that as well. We've had many a laugh at his expense. Yet he's a splendid worker. His right hand is crippled, but even so, you'll scarcely find such a skilled stoker in all Budapest!"

The doctor departs somewhat deflated, but once in the street he stops, places a finger to his forehead, and exclaims triumphantly:

„Ha! Now I know why that girl was grinning! Ah… psychiatry…!"

My box

Another man would have written „my room”. But I cannot, for what I live in is not a room, but rather a kind of slightly larger little case – a box.

It contains a bed, a stove pipe, and seventy-four bedbugs. I know them all by name. Each day a different detachment is on duty; they take turns biting. And sometimes – toward dawn – I am there as well. But when I am at home, the door cannot be shut, because my legs stick out. Old Bolváry, the bailiff, already knows in the vestibule whether I am in, for he sees my feet. Then he comes in, seizes the bedbug detachment on duty, and departs. As for me, I go on sleeping, or I gaze at the icicles hanging from the ceiling – which, in milder weather, are replaced by little marshes and tiny bogs.

Around noon my landlady – a stout Jewish woman – scratches the sole of my foot: that is my pocket watch; from it I know the time. As for other necessities, too, such small tricks and substitutions occur. For instance, a very ancient wicker chair serves me perfectly well in place of a washstand; on a windy night I burned out the wicker from it. Half

of an aged bedsheet performs the office of a towel, and the candlestick is replaced by the drops of tallow with which I fasten the candle to the edge of my bed.

I had almost forgotten that there are cobwebs in my box. Of course there are – and how many! And then, in the fifth crack of the right-hand wall, three cockroaches live. I have often observed them on quiet nights, and have come to the conclusion that all three are old maids, for they are terribly thin, melancholy, and forever bickering. Above all, I infer their spinsterly nature from the way they shake their heads and grumble whenever, returning home at night, I breathe the smell of wine. The masculine bedbugs, on the other hand, behave quite differently in such cases. They charge at me merrily and draw from me a considerable portion of the wine. It has happened more than once that by morning they were somewhat tipsy.

Now I have forgotten something again – and indeed the most important thing. For something else also lives in this little case. In my box dwells the most dreadful, the most desolate solitude. I could not say when it finally moved in with me, for at first it came only as an occasional visitor. But somehow

it grew accustomed to the place. It crouches constantly inside the stove pipe, for it says that from there it hears splendidly the shrieking of the night wind, and then it does not feel cold, because its heart is warmed by sorrow. Even when I am at home, it does not emerge, but waits until I light the tallow candle; then it begins, in a soft whispering voice, to tell all manner of wondrous tales. It speaks of old small-town gardens where cheerful sunbeams wander; then it speaks of good mothers who laughed quietly and spoke in deep voices in warm rooms; it speaks of burning, ardent loves that turn the face rosy and make the eyes bright and shining. And the voice of the mysterious, invisible storyteller grows ever softer, for now it tells of wives and children.

When at last the voice fades away, I speak in my half-sleep:

„I should so very much like to see your mysterious people. How strange they must be!”

And now comes the most wondrous quality of my box. The mysterious inhabitant of the stove pipe – solitude – works some magic, and at once my disgusting little nest expands, and becomes a splendid, sunlit garden in bloom. Along the sandy, gleaming, fragrant paths come the people of the

tales. From somewhere the old village schoolmaster shuffles forth, with a mysterious and important notebook tucked into his pocket; then comes the aged archivist, who always walked home at noon from his office through the small-town streets with steps measured to a hair's breadth. And before he has even vanished among the splendid flowering trees, I hear my father's deep and gentle voice. He is coming. With every step he draws nearer, the garden is more and more overcast by the dimness of dusk. It is already quite dark when he bends toward me and says, with infinite sadness:

„I cannot help your sorrow, my dear son, for I have been dead these ten years."

He goes. For a long time I still hear his steps crunching in the sand.

Now the twilight gloom dies in an instant. Twelve suns flare up at once in the sky; the rays of twelve suns pierce the stiff, sluggish body of darkness. The blazing light rages, surges over the garden – and from behind the most splendid tamarisk bush a woman's face emerges. She looks at me, and then disappears. Infernal darkness falls over the garden, and I, so as not to see that hellish

blackness, close my eyes. Then the mysterious storyteller says softly:

„It is over."

And I reply:

„Yes – everything is over."

And in the morning, when I awake, instead of the people of the tale, loathsome bedbugs and cockroaches swarm about me. I do not know what compels me: I drive my knife into the picture hanging above my bed – the one upon which divine goodness is daubed. For there is such a thing in my box as well; I merely forgot to mention it. But is it worth speaking of such things?

The demon

As they sat facing one another, the man's eyes were from time to time veiled by misty shreds of memory at the thought that this woman – this splendid, snow-white tigress – was the very same with whom, fifteen years before, he had been able to playfully hide for hours among the luxuriant woods along the banks of the Missouri. In those days she had been called Mildred, the beetle-eyed little girl who now received a whole flood of love letters under the resplendent name of Amarillis. Since then, this was only the third time they had met again – first a few weeks ago, in Amarillis's world, behind the scenes of the place known briefly as Burman's Gaily, half theatre, half variety show – and ever since, the man had followed in her wake like a somnambulist, driven now not only by the old, lily-pure love, but by the most aching, most consuming desire.

From the woman's alabaster shoulder the flame-red silk robe had slipped – by no means entirely by chance – revealing her form; with her jet-black, glowing eyes she watched, motionless, the

slave writhing before her. In her own soul, too, fairy-images of the past cried out for a moment, but cool reason and the steel-hard purposefulness she had long made her habit soon slaughtered them one by one. At last she spoke softly:

„I pity you, my dear friend, for I see that you truly suffer. But I cannot help you. Without love I will not give myself to you, not even to an old, dear knight – and love you I do not; perhaps I never did. Nor are we suited to one another: I, the free and frivolous sprite of a painted world – you, a sober, serious citizen, the chief cashier of the Metropolitan Bank, if I am not mistaken…”

She fell silent and idly toyed with the cut-glass stopper of her little perfume bottle. Then suddenly something occurred to her.

Smiling, as though in jest, yet in a very low voice, she said:

„And yet – if indeed your passion for me consumes you as deeply as you claim – there might perhaps be a way…”

The man started; his nostrils flared like those of a starving beast.

„The day after tomorrow,” Amarillis whispered, lowering her eyes with a practiced

maidenly modesty, „I must pay fifty thousand dollars by evening, or I shall be in serious trouble. If you could assist me – naturally, I should not prove ungrateful…”

The man let his gaze wander dreamily over the imitation tapestries on the wall. He knew that his hopes had collapsed, dissolved into nothingness, yet he could not move.

But suddenly something occurred to him as well – something that made his heart leap to his throat. His eyes closed, and before his closed lids floated Amarillis’s snow-white body, as it had so often done in his half-dreams.

His face was not pale, but of a dull, ashen yellow when he spoke softly:

„Amarillis, wait for me the day after tomorrow at six o’clock in the afternoon.”

Throughout that entire day he felt as though he were no longer himself, but someone else – as though some new, alien soul had taken up residence in his body.

Even as he hurried down the carpeted staircase of the bank building after office hours, with nervous, rapid steps, the money was already in his pocket; yet he felt as though, instead of soft, silky

banknotes, someone had thrust a heavy, angular cobblestone into it. He tried to smile at the thought, but as he drew the corner of his mouth aside, his teeth chattered faintly.

He did not go home to dine – he was an unmarried, solitary man, free to do as he pleased, at worst old Orsolya, his housekeeper, would scold him in the evening – but instead made his way into one of the better restaurants on Eighteenth Street. And while, after the splendid meal, he delightedly blew long purple coils of smoke from a cigar as thick as a carriage pole into the air, he tried to conjure before his burning imagination that moment when…

But he could make nothing of it.

When he stepped out into the street, the endless rows of towering houses and the surging tide of people began to whirl about him like a vast, dark wheel, and then he spoke aloud the refrain of Edgar Poe's famous poem, The Raven. „Told the raven, 'Nevermore'" – though he himself did not know why he said it, nor how it had come to mind.

When the clock struck six in the Carmelite church, he hurried up to Amarillis's apartment.

When he kissed her hand, she scarcely even glanced at him; from his voice, from the pressure of his hand, she already knew that everything had happened as it must. She smiled at how simple and natural it all was.

The man's face, as he handed over the money, suddenly turned leaden grey. It was like the face of one dead for two days – one who no longer sees the whiteness of living flesh.

Amarillis carelessly tossed the bundle of banknotes onto the table and stared fixedly into the man's eyes. She knew what had happened, and before her, too, there once more flickered the groves along the banks of the Missouri. Old, dear voices echoed faintly – but all this lasted only for a single instant.

She shrugged and asked herself silently:

„Does the hunter ask the pheasant whether he may shoot it? Which reminds me – I am very fond of roast pheasant."

She smiled, and in token of complete surrender drew out the splendid diamond pin that held her dress together at her breast.